For 25 years, Dallas bore brunt of a nation's anger

By Hugh Aynesworth
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

DALLAS

Twenty-five years ago today this city was the site of one of America's worst tragedies. And though most of the wounds have healed, scars are still visible — mute evidence of what occurred on a bright autumn Friday afternoon in a simpler era.

You need no reminder: John F. Kennedy, a bright, young president from whom many expected much, was shot down like a dog while waving and thanking those who had come out to welcome him.

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Within hours, Lee Harvey Oswald, a poorly educated, secretive former Marine who had once renounced his U.S. citizenship to live in the Soviet Union, was captured in a suburban theater — a suspect in both the slaying of Mr. Kennedy and a subsequent fatal shooting of Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippit.

At Dallas' Love Field, where just before noon Mr. Kennedy and his entourage had landed to rousing cheers, Lyndon B. Johnson quickly was sworn in as chief executive on board the presidential airplane — before hurrying back to Washington to solidify the government.

Nobody knew for sure if the attack here was but one of others to come from some foreign power.

Aides to Mr. Kennedy, his widow, Jacqueline — still dressed in her bloodied pink suit — and those Washington press "regulars" who covered Mr. Kennedy flew back to Washington in a virtual state of shock. Mr. Kennedy's body was rushed to Bethesda Naval Hospital for autopsy.

Meanwhile, in Dallas another kind of shock was setting in.

The city had been castigated four weeks earlier because a handful of rabid, right-wing activists jeered at U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai E. Stevenson, spat on him and hit him in the head with placards after the diplomat delivered a speech.

So nasty had it been that some had warned Mr. Kennedy not to include Dallas in his two-day Texas swing — which was designed to mend a factional fight within the Texas Democratic Party.

An embarrassed Mayor Earle Cabell had challenged the city to rebuke

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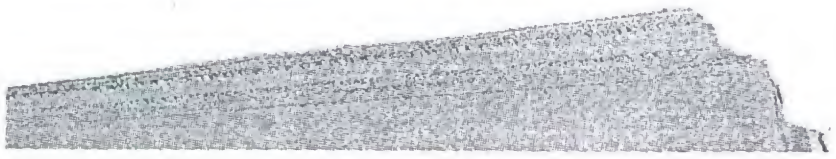

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such extremism and show "what it's really made of."

"Dallas shed its mantle as the hate capital of Dixie long ago, back in the '30s, when it fought the Ku Klux Klan," said the colorful mayor, head of a large dairy. "We can never revert to those ugly days."

But to a puzzled, frantic and angry nation, Dallas apparently had done just that. And the vitriol began.

"How could the Dallas police have allowed this to happen," one network television commentator asked, "when they knew Oswald worked on the parade route?"

The preponderance of the early attacks on the city came as a direct result of what had happened to Mr. Stevenson — and in general the radical right was blamed.

"If they didn't do it," charged one broadcaster, "they should be blamed anyway. They helped it happen."

H.L. Hunt, seen as the leader of the arch-conservative strata in Dallas, quickly left town. "I didn't know what might happen," he later said, "but it wasn't wise to wait and see."

That was Friday and Saturday.

Sunday was the cruncher.

As Dallas authorities walked a manacled Oswald to a waiting police car to move him into custody of the county sheriff to await trial, a chubby, middle-aged nightclub owner named Jack Ruby pushed through scores of policemen and shot Oswald with one pop of his .38 caliber Colt Cobra.

Almost two days later to the minute — at the same Parkland Hospital where his victim had died — Oswald expired.

What had been an avalanche of cries about stupidity and political radicalism now turned to stupidity and conspiracy.

Not many people believed the story was ended. Even though Ruby — in still another situation that cried out for taste but didn't get it — was tried and found guilty, with no evident conspiracy ties, there were many who just didn't believe.

The Warren Commission, named after its chairman, Chief Justice Earl Warren, subsequently interviewed participants, near participants, opportunists and fools (the commission interviewed 552 witnesses, the FBI more than 25,000).

But after the inquiry found that Oswald killed the president alone and without any evidence of a conspiracy and that Ruby also acted alone, most Americans refused to believe it.

The commission's report was crippled almost from the start because it had rushed out its verdict before the 1964 election, had not interviewed various witnesses and was less than candid about some of its methodology.

Though that report has been proven to have been considerably more honest, more objective and of far greater depth than any subsequent "probe" or "inquiry," its all-too-human flaws opened it to extraordinary criticism.

It became the root source of more than 400 conspiracy-tinged books. None, it seemed, could even formulate an alternate theory without poking for a hole or an opening in the "official" investigation.

Dallas took its lumps, too — some big ones.

After a decade of denial and one of quietly hoping it would all go away, Dallas finally has decided to quit worrying about it. Next Feb. 22, the city will open the "Sixth Floor," a slick new museum devoted to a historical view of the event.

At 12:30 p.m. today, there likely will be — as always — hundreds of folks lined up along Elm Street, to reflect on those bloody moments and what until then now seems to have been a happier time.